

**STATEMENT OF
JAMES R. LYONS
UNDER SECRETARY, NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Lands Management
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

**Regarding the Promulgation of Regulations Concerning
Roadless Areas Within the National Forest System**

February 22, 2000

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Forest Service efforts to conserve and enhance the important social and ecological values of roadless areas within the National Forest System. As you know, on October 19, 1999, we published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register that outlined a two part process that could: 1) limit certain development activities such as road construction in inventoried roadless areas across the country; and 2) determine what activities are consistent with protecting the important ecological and social values associated with inventoried roadless areas.

As President Clinton emphasized during his announcement in October, more and more, the American people recognize the inextricable link between the quality of their lives and the health of the lands and waters that surround them. Although roadless areas represent less than one percent of the American landmass, they serve as a reservoir of rare and vanishing resources. They provide clean drinking water, habitat for fish and wildlife, abundant hunting and fishing, recreation opportunities, and reference areas for research. In the face of growing sprawl and urbanization, these values are immeasurable. They act as a barrier against noxious invasive plant and animal species and as strongholds for native fish populations. Roadless areas often provide vital habitat and migration routes for numerous wildlife species and are particularly important for those requiring large home ranges. Many roadless areas also act as ecological anchors allowing nearby federal, state, and private lands to be developed for economic purposes.

By law, we are required to manage national forests and grasslands in a manner that seeks to meet local needs, while recognizing their national value. Roadless areas on national forests need to be viewed from a broader context. For example, between 1992 and 1997, nearly 16 million acres of forest, farms, and open space were converted to urban or other uses. In less than a decade, we have doubled the loss of undeveloped land. This helps to explain why President Clinton has asked the American people, who own this land, about how they want their remaining wild and undeveloped roadless areas managed.

The American people need to know the consequences of continuing to develop these roadless areas. For instance, road construction may increase the risk of erosion, landslides, and slope failure, endangering the health of watersheds that provide drinking water to local communities and critical habitat for fish and wildlife. These effects can be particularly acute in high elevation, erosion prone roadless areas. Development in such areas can allow entry of invasive plants and animals that can threaten the health of native species, increase human-caused wildfire, disrupt sensitive wildlife habitat, and otherwise compromise the attributes that make these sensitive areas socially valuable and ecologically important to millions of Americans feeling the threat of losing open space all around them.

In recent years, the public has rightfully questioned whether the Forest Service should build new roads into controversial roadless areas when the agency has difficulty maintaining its existing road system. The current national forest road system includes 380,000 miles of roads. The agency currently has a road reconstruction and maintenance backlog of approximately \$8.4 billion and it receives only about 20 percent of the annual funding needed to maintain the safety and environmental condition of its road system.

Almost two years ago, I watched as the House of Representatives came within a single vote of cutting \$42 million out of Forest Service roads budget because of these issues.

For too long, others, such as the court system and interest groups, have controlled the debate over long-term management of roadless areas. The President's direction puts this issue squarely back where it belongs, into the hands of the American people and the resource professionals of the Forest Service.

To date, the public has engaged in unprecedented levels; evidence that the American people care deeply about this issue. We have already received 500,000 comments

even though we have not released a draft environmental impact statement yet. The Forest Service has held over 185 public meetings to date with more to come. This too is an unprecedented public outreach effort by the agency.

I think this speaks to the national significance and public concern over this issue. I assure you that when we release an actual proposal and offer alternatives, we will conduct an unprecedented amount of public meetings, open houses, and other public involvement to ensure the American people shape the future management of their lands.

The Forest Service is in the process of developing the range of alternatives that will be analyzed in the draft environmental impact statement and accompanying proposed rule. As we move forward with the rulemaking and developing the draft environmental impact statement, I anticipate that our roadless rulemaking will provide direction for certain national issues while allowing other decisions, to be made at the appropriate regional or local level. Our alternatives will examine a range of prohibitions in inventoried roadless areas such as limitations on road construction and development in unroaded portions of inventoried roadless areas. Alternatives will also consist of procedures and criteria to determine what activities are consistent with the social and ecological values associated with inventoried roadless and other unroaded areas. These procedures could be implemented at the forest level through additional open and public processes. The final rule will delineate a framework for this forest-by-forest implementation process.

National prohibitions of certain activities, such as road construction and reconstruction, could affect about 54 million acres of inventoried roadless areas. Roughly 38 percent of these areas are already in management designations that do not allow for road construction. The amount of acres, in addition to the 54 million acres of inventoried roadless areas, affected by the procedures could be determined in the future through local forest planning.

Public Involvement for Roadless Initiative

The initial opportunity for public involvement began on October 19, 1999, with the publication in the Federal Register of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS. Release of the NOI initiated a public scoping period that continues through issuance of a draft environmental impact statement and proposed rule.

As I mentioned earlier, to demonstrate how seriously we take this open public process, we held over 185 public meetings, or listening sessions, including a meeting on every national forest and grassland that has inventoried roadless areas. Some forests held multiple meetings, based on what they determined was appropriate to provide adequate opportunity for the public to gain information and provide comment. We left broad discretion to our local forests to determine what they thought was the most effective forum and manner to share information and collect public input.

Along with the numerous public meetings to ensure that the public has access to information on the roadless rulemaking process, we have been posting information on the roadless website as we develop databases and begin the analysis. We have posted both state and forest maps of inventoried roadless areas, acreage figures, meeting schedules, general information and news articles on the website. Among the news items, we have posted a wide range of viewpoints. This level of information sharing is unprecedented for any broad scale proposal of this magnitude. Because not everyone has access to the Internet, this information is also available at national forest and grassland offices.

As I mentioned earlier, from the public meetings, letters, cards and e-mails we received over 500,000 comments. Many are pleased with the roadless initiative; many are not. Many believe that the rule should apply to all forests and others feel that some forests should be exempt. There are many concerns about how the rule will affect access, what the impacts will be to communities, impacts to the timber industry, and how will the rule affect the agency's ability to address wildfires and forest health.

Effects

I want to make it abundantly clear that our intention is not to block access to national forests and grasslands, only to ensure that public access to public lands occurs in a manner that conserves the nationally significant values of roadless areas.

Some have suggested that we are attempting to create de facto wilderness and to “block access to the people’s land.” Nothing could be further from the truth. In 1997, 860 million national forest visitors took advantage of more than 23,000 recreation facilities and hundreds of thousands of miles of forest roads, trails and scenic byways.

The issues outlined above, along with others, will be addressed in the draft

environmental impact statement. I also want to make it clear that the rulemaking will not close any roads or trails, or block legal access to private or state land.

Timber Harvest Effects

For the past 5 years less than 4 percent of the agency's timber harvest has been from inventoried roadless areas. Our preliminary data indicates less than 5 percent of our 5 year projected timber volume is dependent on road construction in inventoried roadless areas. Eighty percent of our national forests estimate less than 5 percent of their prospective timber volume is dependent on new road construction in inventoried roadless areas. Similarly, less than 5-percent of national forests estimate more than 25 percent of their total planned volume is dependent on construction of new roads in inventoried roadless areas. Although effects may be more adverse in certain local communities, nationally the effects will not be significant.

Fire Risk

Preliminary data also indicate that the degree of overlap between areas that the agency has identified as having a higher risk from wildfires and inventoried roadless areas is small, only 3 million acres of the estimated 24 million. Part of the reason can be attributed to many inventoried roadless areas being at higher elevations that are typically wetter and cooler, not adjacent to communities, and not influenced by past management activities. Many fire ecologists believe that unroaded areas have less potential for larger, higher intensity, more severe forest fires than roaded areas. This conclusion is based on several factors; fire suppression has been focused more in roaded than unroaded areas allowing more fuels to accumulate in the roaded areas. Also, in some areas, past logging practices have left many acres with additional dead and down woody material on the ground. Also timber stands are generally more dense in roaded than unroaded areas, particularly in logged areas that have regenerated. These regenerated stands are often highly susceptible to forest fire damage. There are exceptions to this and the degree of overlap and consequences will be addressed in the draft environmental analysis.

For the National Forest System, the initial fire risk mapping efforts have identified up to 24 million acres at high risk and 32 million acres at moderate risk. The priorities for treating these areas will be to focus on communities at risk, species at risk, and watersheds at risk. In particular, priorities will focus on protections of life and property, usually not a problem for roadless areas, but rather more important for the wildland/urban interface where roads are more plentiful. All areas, not just those within roadless areas, will be priorities based on these risks.

Status of the Environmental Impact Statement

The agency is planning to publish a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and proposed rule for public review in the spring of 2000. The draft EIS will outline specific alternatives and provide a detailed basis for discussion with the public about how roadless areas should be managed in the future. The Forest Service will provide another period for public comment and will host two series of meetings and public involvement opportunities upon release of the proposed rule and draft EIS this year. The first series will occur around the release of the draft EIS to share information and answer questions. The second series will occur near the end of the public comment period to take comments on the alternatives. The draft EIS and proposed rule will be accompanied by information and data that state, Tribal and local governments and the American people need to understand the potential effects of the agency's draft proposal. The final EIS and final rule will be published late this year.

The Forest Service has attempted to address the management of roadless areas for over 30 years. The public, state and local governments and Congress have all been active participants in this debate. As you are aware, in January 1998, I initiated a process to consider changes in how the Forest Service road system is developed, used, maintained and funded and to suspend temporarily road construction in certain unroaded areas. This led to the current "interim rule", that temporarily suspended road construction and reconstruction in unroaded areas while our proposal to develop a long-term road management policy was being developed. The agency received more than 80,000 public comments on these efforts, the majority of which called for a permanent halt to road building in roadless areas. However, the public also agreed with the agency that management policy for the existing road system needed to be developed. Accordingly, we will soon publish the draft road management policy in the Federal Register and begin the public comment period.

As we work on the rulemaking process for roadless areas, we will continue to work on the road management policy. There will be some overlap as we pursue these two separate but closely related actions. This overlap will be resolved as these rulemakings are brought to closure.

With the roadless issue finally behind us, I intend to focus the agency's efforts on restoring forest ecosystems that are out of balance due to widespread fire suppression and past management practices.

It is my expectation that we will need multiple methods to address our forest ecosystem health needs. In the process, we can supply jobs, revenue, and a more stable flow of wood fiber, all while improving land health.

In the absence of adequately addressing the roadless issue, it is questionable whether the public would support the actions needed to restore healthy, diverse, resilient, and productive national forests and grasslands.

SUMMARY

Thirty years of local planning efforts, wilderness debates, appeals, lawsuits, and injunctions have not solved the issue of long-term management of some 54 million acres of roadless areas in our national forest system. As a result, the Forest Service has embarked on a national initiative to determine how the American people want these lands managed. After decades of debate, controversy, and litigation, we are engaging the American people in this important dialogue.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you and Members of the Committee may have.